

CHARLES HOMER HASKINS  
PRIZE LECTURE FOR 2013

*A Life of Learning:  
Wandering Among Fields*  
**Robert Alter**

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## ON CHARLES HOMER HASKINS

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Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at The Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887 and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard University, where he served as dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. At the time of his retirement in 1931, he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America (1926).

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of 13.

## HASKINS PRIZE LECTURERS

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2013	Robert Alter
2012	Joyce Appleby
2011	Henry Glassie
2010	Nancy Siraisi
2009	William Labov
2008	Theodor Meron
2007	Linda Nochlin
2006	Martin E. Marty
2005	Gerda Lerner
2004	Peter Gay
2003	Peter Brown
2002	Henry A. Millon
2001	Helen Vendler
2000	Geoffrey Hartman
1999	Clifford Geertz
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis
1996	Robert William Fogel
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober
1994	Robert K. Merton
1993	Annemarie Schimmel
1992	Donald W. Meinig
1991	Milton Babbitt
1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
1989	Judith N. Shklar
1988	John Hope Franklin
1987	Carl E. Schorske
1986	Milton V. Anastos
1985	Lawrence Stone
1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
1983	Maynard Mack

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT ALTER

Robert Alter has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, since 1967. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the Council of Scholars of the Library of Congress, and is past president of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. He has twice been a Guggenheim Fellow, and has been a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem, and Old Dominion Fellow at Princeton University.

Professor Alter has written widely on the European novel from the eighteenth century to the present, on contemporary American fiction, and on modern Hebrew literature. He has also written extensively on literary aspects of the Bible. His publications include two prize-winning volumes on biblical narrative and poetry and award-winning translations of Genesis and of the Five Books of Moses. He has devoted book-length studies to Fielding, Stendhal, and the self-reflexive tradition in the novel. His books have been translated into eight different languages. Among his publications since the beginning of the 1990s are *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (1991), *The World of Biblical Literature* (1992), *Hebrew and Modernity* (1994), *Imagined Cities* (2005), and *Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (2007). His most recent books are *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (2010), *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary* (2011), and *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets* (2013).

In 2009, Professor Alter received the Robert Kirsch Award from the *Los Angeles Times* for lifetime contribution to American letters.

## INTRODUCTION

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Professor Robert Alter delivered the 2013 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture, the thirty-first in this annual series, which is named for the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies. The Executive Committee of the Delegates of ACLS selects the prize-winner and lecturer from the many worthy nominations put forward by our community.

The lecturer's charge is "to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar, on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning; and to explore through one's own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship." Haskins lecturers do not present the products of their own scholarly research; rather, they share with the scholarly community the very personal process of a particular lifetime of learning.

In Professor Alter's case, no short biography can adequately portray the range of his remarkable scholarly output. He is the author of 23 books and hundreds of scholarly articles, translations, and book reviews. He is, in addition, a presence in the public square, regularly publishing essays on political and cultural issues. "It is no exaggeration," writes one reviewer of his work, "to say that within biblical studies Alter has been the most important figure in creating the new subfield of literary analysis of the Bible. . . . Alter assumes a continuity of human experience (fear, exultation, anguish, etc.) that makes the concerns of the text directly accessible to the reader, whose job is to focus on the literary devices (plot characterization, dialogue, imagery, etc.) through which the world of the Bible is brought into the world of the reader."<sup>1</sup>

"*The Art of Biblical Narrative* is a book of surprises," writes another reviewer. "Alter's literary criticism of the Old Testament lucidly presents inroads to a textual critique of its historiated narrative."<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to this book, Professor Alter describes how this enormously influential volume emerged from an "informal colloquium" he led when a visiting professor at Stanford Uni-

versity in 1971. The ideal of the scholar-teacher is the premise of much of the work of ACLS and our member societies. Professor Alter exemplifies that ideal.

Throughout his career, Professor Alter has brought deep expertise, analytic precision, and a keen sensibility to his explorations and explications of biblical narrative and literary style. He understands that humans need narratives; we need a sense of meaning, values, and cultural authenticity. In the preface to one of his most recent works, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, he says, “An imaginative writer . . . is before all else a language-using animal, and when the language of the texts you cannot embrace as revealed truth is strongly chiseled, hewn from deep quarries of moral and spiritual experience, you somehow have to contend with it, and given its intrinsic poetic power, you may even be tempted to put it to use.”<sup>3</sup> In this passage, one might say that Alter provides a mandate for scholarship in the humanities: expressive power that you have to contend with and which can be, must be, put to use.

Professor Alter’s 2013 Haskins Prize Lecture is an appealing and personal account of a longstanding engagement with many of the most evocative stories of Western literature. At the same time, it is a pleasant reminder of the manifold impact one scholar’s life of learning can have on generations of students, fellow scholars, and, indeed, a public whose very culture stems from, and is held together by, shared narrative.

— Pauline Yu, President  
American Council of Learned Societies

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> James S. Ackerman, “Review of *The World of Biblical Literature*,” *The Journal of Religion* 74.3 (1994): 382-84.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Kreizman “Review of *The Art of Biblical Literature*,” *MLN Comparative Literature* 97.5 (1982): 1244.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton UP, 2010), 7.



ROBERT ALTER

*A Life of Learning:  
Wandering Among Fields*

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A number of years ago, having arrived at the University of Houston to give a lecture, I was joined for lunch by a visiting scholar from France. Someone at the table asked him what his field was. With a haughtiness that I associate, perhaps unfairly, with a certain kind of French intellectual, he answered, dismissively, "A peasant has a field. I do not have a field." I have reflected on that remark from time to time ever since, and though I don't in the least identify with the tone in which it was delivered, I have come to the conclusion that I, too, don't have a field, or that at any rate, I have chosen too many rows to hoe, going in different directions, to constitute a neatly demarcated field.

My intellectual history has certainly been a story of wandering out of fields. I decided to do graduate work at Harvard in comparative literature rather than in a single national literature because I didn't want to be limited to a set of texts in just one national tradition. My dissertation on the picaresque novel began with the first instance of the genre, the sixteenth-century Spanish *Lazarillo de Tormes* and concluded with Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* and Saul Bellow's *Augie March*, but when I started my first teaching job in the English department at Columbia, because the central chapters of my dissertation had focused on eighteenth-century novels (one in French as well as works in English), I was duly classified as an eighteenth-century specialist and found myself teaching courses that included Addison, Swift, and Pope as well as Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, and Sterne. These were teaching occasions that gave me great pleasure, and in keeping with the logic of my appointment, I began work on a critical study of Fielding, which I completed around the time I was moving on

from Columbia. I suppose the book was not altogether a straight-up eighteenth-century project since I sweepingly called it *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel*, and under that rubric, I was able to sneak into the final chapter some discussion of Nabokov, an enthusiasm I had developed in those years and that I have maintained until now.

There was another way in which I did not sit still among the English Augustan writers during my four-year teaching stint at Columbia. By my late teens, I had acquired a very good literary command of Hebrew in all its major historical phases, with a special interest in the modern period. Modern Hebrew had been one of my minor literatures at Harvard, though everything I knew about it was self-taught because there was no one on the Harvard faculty with any competence in that area. While I was teaching and writing on the eighteenth-century English novelists, I had also begun to publish articles on modern Hebrew literature—and, at the same time, on Jewish-American writers, who at that moment, in the 1960s, were at their apogee. After the fact, I suspect that my senior colleagues in the Columbia English department looked askance at this extra-curricular activity because it did not address the field for which they thought they had hired me.

But this is precisely what brought me to the position at Berkeley where I have thrived for four and a half decades. Comparative literature had just been granted departmental status under the direction of Alain Renoir, a wildly energetic and at times zany man with a strong intellectual vision, who had the idea of building a department out of joint appointments with other departments that would authoritatively span the literary globe. He wanted someone in modern Hebrew literature, and at the time I may have been the only visible person capable of putting together two literate English sentences on the subject (the situation now is much improved). He made me an offer I couldn't refuse—a tenured position with a handsome increase in salary, and so I accepted sight unseen and traveled west of Chicago for the first time in my life to a place where new professional horizons were to open for me.

The first course on Hebrew literature that I taught at Berkeley was a graduate seminar on the poetry of Yehuda Amichai. I don't think I had more than three or four students, though within a very few years the registration for such courses would double, then triple, and Berkeley has remained the major center outside Israel for graduate studies in modern Hebrew literature. Meanwhile, my comparative literature courses concentrated on the European and American novel, generally after the eighteenth century, with special attention to Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dickens, Joyce, Melville, Faulkner, and, of course, Nabokov.

In the mid-1970s, I finished a book on the self-reflexive tradition of the novel and began work on a critical biography of Stendhal. As I launched research on Stendhal, I had no inkling that I would soon be deeply engaged in an area millennia removed from anything I had done till then and from anything in my graduate training. One could say that I stumbled into the field of biblical studies rather than consciously chose it. I had long been fascinated by biblical narrative and also puzzled by how it could be so complex and compelling when, given the stark economy of narrative means it deployed, it seemed on the surface barebones and perhaps even simple. I should note here that while I was an undergraduate at Columbia College, I took three years of courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary with H.L. Ginsberg, one of the eminent biblical philologists of his generation. This gave me the requisite linguistic tools to work with biblical texts but no equipment at all to deal with their literary character, which was, after all, what most interested me. A couple of years before my departure for Berkeley in 1967, I had committed myself to delivering three or four articles a year on Jewish life and letters to *Commentary*, then a left-liberal journal. This meant that I was constantly scrambling for subjects and sometimes working up unfamiliar ones in a process of ongoing self-education (occasionally, I would recall Edmund Wilson's exemplary precedent as a literary journalist). I had started thinking about biblical narrative with some sense that after a decade and a half of investigating the novel, I might have a handle on how these ancient Hebrew narratives worked. Sometime in the middle of 1975, searching for a

topic for my column in *Commentary*, I asked my editor there, Neal Kozodoy, whether he would be interested in a piece on the need for a literary perspective on the Bible. I was a little surprised when he immediately agreed because the predominant focus of the magazine was on contemporary issues. I produced what I thought of as a feisty essay, intended to be provocative about conventional biblical scholarship, which, I argued, wasted most of its time tracking down purported Akkadian loan-words while evincing no capacity for reading a narrative. The chief exhibit of the article was the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, often characterized by biblical scholars as an interpolation in the Joseph story but in fact intricately connected through theme and motif with what comes before and after.

What followed the appearance of this article was a snowball effect that I had not in the least anticipated. There was a spate of letters, some to me personally, some to the editor of the magazine, most of them very enthusiastic. I had initially imagined the essay as a one-off foray into a field to which I considered myself an outsider. The response I received encouraged me to write another article on the subject because I did have more to say on the workings of biblical narrative. Over the next four years, I published three additional articles in *Commentary* on biblical narrative and two others in academic journals. All of these became the core of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, which appeared in 1981 and which, to my astonishment, has remained in print ever since, with a revised and somewhat expanded edition published in 2011.

My writing on the Bible was strongly reinforced by my teaching at Berkeley, where I have always enjoyed the greatest freedom to take up whatever topics interested me. In those years, the professor of Hebrew Bible on our faculty was a formidable scholar who devoted almost his entire career to producing a 3,000-page commentary on the Book of Leviticus. He steadfastly refused to teach anything but Leviticus to his graduate students, despite the remonstrations of his colleagues. Just at the time when I was beginning to write on biblical narrative, one of my graduate students in modern Hebrew literature—she would become a dear

friend—came to me with a complaint: she and her fellow students of modern Hebrew recognized the justice of being required to take two seminars on biblical topics, but it seemed to them unreasonable that the two seminars should be exclusively devoted to a very minute reading of a single chapter from Leviticus. This objection pricked my pedagogical conscience, and for the following semester I devised a seminar on biblical narrative. There were 10 or so students, several of them remarkably gifted, and week after week we shared as a group the excitement of exploring what seemed to us, perhaps improbably, a virgin subject. A year or two later, I offered a seminar on biblical poetry (it would eventually lead to my 1985 book, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*), and I have continued since then to teach courses on these topics and on individual biblical books. It has been especially gratifying that two of the later participants in these seminars, Ilana Pardes and Robert Kawashima, went on to make outstanding contributions to the literary understanding of the Bible.

In the account I have rendered so far, I have not dealt with a seeming contradiction over which I pondered at the time and about which I still have no confident answer. At precisely the moment when I was formulating my ideas on biblical narrative, I was also writing the book on Stendhal, devoting thought to his distinctive style as a novelist, the way his novels reflected the political and social realities of the post-Napoleonic era, and the peculiar alchemy that turned the materials of his precarious and occasionally farcical personal experience into great fiction. Was I a little crazy, I sometimes asked myself, spending weeks trying to reconstruct a forgotten convention of biblical narrative and then switching to an exploration of the subtle play of irony in the narrator's treatment of the protagonist in *The Charterhouse of Parma*?

Perhaps the most straightforward answer to this question is that these were simply two different topics that interested me, reflecting my incurable condition as someone who could never be a peasant and was not attached to the ancestral soil of one field. There may be, however, more substantive connections between my engagement in modern literature and my engagement in the Bible. I would begin explaining this in a rather general way by

confessing that as a critic I have always been an inveterate literary enthusiast. The late Tony Judt once introduced me for a lecture I gave at New York University by describing me as above all a celebratory critic, and I think that is accurate. I have written about works of literature (and taught them as well with the same motive) because I love them, and I have treated them analytically—but not, I hope, rhapsodically—in an effort to show to others what it is about these texts that is worthy of a reader’s love and an occasion for a reader’s enjoyment. The story of Jacob in Genesis strikes me as one of the most amazing representations in our literary tradition of a human life evolving through time—young Jacob the calculating man, bargainer and wrestler; Jacob the extravagant lover of Rachel and then of her firstborn son; the weakened Jacob turned into an object of manipulation by his sons whom he has unwittingly alienated through his paternal favoritism; old Jacob in the presence of Pharaoh, looking back somberly on his many years, which he calls “few and evil.” The story of Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*, a life that ends much sooner, is remarkable in a very different way, being the story of a young man who is born, so he feels, at the wrong historical moment, whose self-conscious struggle to overcome the disadvantages of class make him a figure of wry comedy that finally tumbles into tragedy, and whose take on reality has been gravely skewed, like that of Don Quixote, by the books he has read.

Beyond such parallel if somewhat different enthusiasms for splendidly achieved narratives, my simultaneous attraction to ancient Hebrew and modern European literature was motivated in part by a curiosity about the nuts and bolts of narrative. The 1970s, we should recall, were the heyday of the influence of structuralism on literary studies, its principal manifestation being a new sub-discipline with a newfangled name, narratology. I was reading the French narratologists—chief among them, Gérard Genette—with considerable interest, though I never shared their ambition to produce a technical set of definitions of narrative as a formal system, and I found many of their notions of plot, theme, and, above all, character too mechanical. Nevertheless, such topics as the interplay between narration and dialogue, the manipulation

of time in narrative, the use of analogies between episodes, seemed deeply interesting to me not because they were manifestations of a formal system governed by internal laws but because an alertness to how they operated might make us better readers of the stories.

In this regard, my new involvement in the Bible led to something I had not initially expected. When I began to write on biblical narrative, I imagined that my experience as a critic of the novel would help me to see certain aspects of the Bible's narrative art that had escaped others, and that had especially escaped biblical scholars. To a limited degree, I was actually able to realize this ambition, but I discovered something rather different at the same time. Because biblical narrative is, paradoxically, a narrative of bare essentials and a narrative of great subtlety and sophistication, I began to realize that a close scrutiny of its operations might provide instructive insight into the workings of narrative as such. The Bible could actually teach me about narrative. Biblical narrative, for example, often makes use of interior monologue. This is a technique we usually associate with modernists such as Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, where the monologues run on for page after page, often in luxuriant language. In the Bible, interior monologues are typically a dozen words or less, and this very reduced scale enables one to see more clearly what motivates the choice of the technique and how it interacts with other modes of narration.

Thus, when Saul devises a scheme to have David killed on the battlefield, his intention is conveyed in the following interior monologue: "And Saul had thought, 'Let not my hand be against him but let the hand of the Philistines be against him,'" (1 Samuel 18:17). As to the other figures in this episode, we are told that Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David (the only woman in the entire Bible of whom this is explicitly said), that the people loved David, but for David himself we are given only public—and, I would think, politically motivated—speech, with no hint of his feelings or intentions. In this way, we see interior monologue used to render Saul perfectly transparent while David remains opaque. It proves to be a dangerous transparency in the Machia-

vellian political world of the Book of Samuel, here intimating that the plot will fail and that the plotter may come to a bad end. Much later in the story, the previously occulted David will exhibit something of Saul's transparency, adopting Saul's very strategy, when, as things begin to fall apart in his life, he contrives to get rid of Uriah by having him killed on the battlefield. An examination of the David story, then, might actually offer some guidance for tracking the deployment of shifting narrative perspectives in *The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*. The Bible, as the earliest set of great narratives in the Western tradition that uses something akin to novelistic dialogue and a novelistic flexibility of narrative means, could serve, as I came to see, as a kind of primer of literary narrative.

I do not mean to suggest a perfect match between ancient and modern narrative. There are aspects of biblical narrative that are quite unlike the novel. Much of the biblical material has been assembled editorially as a kind of collage of disparate sources, sometimes purposefully, sometimes perplexingly, and there is of course nothing that corresponds to this in the novel. Narratorial comment in biblical narrative is close to zero-degree, whereas many novelists exploit narrators who abundantly comment, analyze, and generalize. There are also narrative conventions that are unique to the Bible, the two most prominent involving repetition, with significant variation in the repetition on the microscopic level of words and phrases and on the macroscopic level of plot. Nevertheless, much that goes on in biblical narrative—the use of point of view, the formulation of dialogue, recurring motifs, parallels between episodes—directly adumbrates procedures of the novel.

I suspect that there may have been substantive as well as formal issues that drew me at that pivotal moment in my career as a critic simultaneously to Stendhal and to the Bible. A chief reason, after all, that makes imaginative narrative compelling is its capacity to delineate a rich variety of human possibilities with a degree of penetration and sometimes of empathic insight that we are not privileged to enjoy in our extra-literary lives. The psychology of the characters, their cultural experience, their gifts of



perception and their blindness, their class background, the assets or disadvantages of their physical constitution, are seen to play out in their relationships, their personal morality, their social and political stances, in a revelatory light that is one of the great joys of reading literature.

Many of the passages on which I drew in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* to illustrate the power and the subtle artifice of the biblical tales were taken from the David story. Although I was not conscious of the connection at the time, it now strikes me that the long narrative of Saul and David and *The Charterhouse of Parma* are two of the greatest representations in the Western literary tradition of the political realm and of man as a political animal. The authors of both evince a shrewd understanding that politics is an arena where hardball is played relentlessly, where true intentions must often be disguised, where an exercise of ruthlessness, which on occasion may have to be lethal, is needed to attain or preserve power, and where the struggle for power shapes or distorts character even as distinctive character makes its imprint on the events of the political realm. Both writers are keenly aware that in politics a position of advantage can be suddenly reversed by unanticipated circumstances or by the bold action of one of the characters.

I think, for example, of the inexperienced and pompous young Prince of Parma, who having managed to extort a bare 15 minutes of sexual intimacy from the Duchesse of Sanseverina because of the life-and-death power he wields over her beloved nephew Fabrice, suddenly finds himself left in the lurch, devastated, as this beautiful and brilliant woman rushes off from his court and kingdom forever to marry the Count Mosca. I put this together with a haunting image of the once fierce and powerful David reduced to uncontrollable sobbing by the news of the death of his son Absalom, then angrily confronted by his lifelong military companion and field commander Joab, who orders him to put his grief behind him and to go out to the troops, "For by the LORD I have sworn, if you go not out, that not a man shall spend the night with you, and this will be a greater evil for you than any evil that has befallen you from your youth until now," (2 Samuel 19:8). The

tonality of these two narratives, of course, is strikingly different. The vehicle of Stendhal's novel is a wry, knowing comedy: the Prince of Parma, having coerced the Duchesse of Sanseverina into yielding to him, however briefly, though she has refused his offer of marriage, imagines he may continue to enjoy her favors; she abruptly converts his sordid triumph into defeated frustration, making him a figure of fun. David's fall from regal power is a much darker affair. A causal concatenation of sexual transgression and violence has undercut the great promise of the king's divine election: his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband; then, immediately following, the rape by David's son Amnon of his half-sister Tamar; the bloody vengeance exacted by her brother Absalom; Absalom's flight from the court and his return, only to usurp the throne; his death engineered by Joab. All this is closer to tragedy than to comedy, an enactment of the grim curse pronounced by the prophet Nathan on the house of David. The Prince of Parma, by contrast, is reduced not to bleak despair but to spluttering disappointment that has a farcical tinge. Yet the absolute authority he exercises, which can bring heads to the execution block, is no joke, and the Duchesse has been playing a dangerous game with him. Stendhal's sensibility, shaped by the ironic modes of the French Enlightenment, predisposes him to represent the perilous play of personalities in the political realm in a satiric light, but he is just as aware as the author of the David story that kings kill, and that their minions, grasping for power, may kill as well.

What I have said so far may induce a certain uneasiness in some readers of the Bible. The biblical canon, after all, is an anthology of religious texts, and one might wonder—as in fact some questioners in popular audiences to whom I have lectured have wondered—whether speaking about the Bible in such emphatically literary terms is not a distortion or at any rate a deflection of the purpose of the biblical writers. I have to confess that I am a literary person through and through and consequently this is the way I read the Bible. But I am convinced that no distortion is involved. The culture of ancient Israel constitutes a great anomaly and an enigma. In most respects, ancient Israel was a small

backwater kingdom, sandwiched in between great imperial powers to the east and to the south. In regard to architecture, ceramics, jewelry, sculpture and painting, the findings of archeology suggest a meager material culture, crude in comparison with the splendors of Egypt, Sumer, and Assyria. Yet in literary art, the ancient Hebrew writers altogether eclipsed their neighbors, producing powerful narratives that were formally brilliant and technically innovative and poetry in such texts as Job, Isaiah, Psalms, and the Song of Songs that rivaled any poetry composed in the Mediterranean world. I have no idea how or why this level of literary achievement came about. The Hebrew writers were clearly bent on promoting a new monotheistic vision of reality, but, with their literary gifts, they chose to cast their religious vision in narrative and in verse. There are, of course, extended passages of laws and cultic regulations—the second half of Exodus, most of Leviticus—as well as genealogical lists, census records, and the long catalogue of the furnishings of Solomon's temple and palace. Nevertheless, the bulk of the Hebrew Bible is made up of narrative and poetry, and much of it is extraordinarily original and both formally and conceptually complex.

The preponderantly literary character of the Hebrew Bible has important consequences for how anyone, even the most devout person, should read it. You cannot read a great poem—say, the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job or the panoramic celebration of creation that is Psalm 104—as though it were an instruction manual for theology and the moral way. A poem lives in its images and cadences, and the biblical poets also had a distinctive way of constructing a line of verse and moving from line to line that is different from what we are familiar with in European and American poetry. You would not fully apprehend the meaning of a Shakespeare sonnet if you were unaware that it rhymed, and in a particular pattern of three quatrains followed by a concluding couplet. To take in with any precision what the biblical writers meant to say about God, creation, history, human nature, morality, and the destiny of the people of Israel, you need an informed understanding of the literary modalities they employed to express their vision. The figures in the narrative are neither neat spiritual

exempla, as rabbinic tradition often imagined them, or types prefiguring the ultimate story of the Incarnation and the Passion, as Christian commentators conceived them, but vividly concrete, complexly realized individuals shot through with flaws and contradictions. If a reader really wants to understand what the biblical writers mean to say about humanity and its response or recalcitrance to God's imperatives, he or she must begin not by looking for doctrinal truths but by reading the narratives as brilliantly realized literature, with at least some knowledge of the conventions and techniques the writers employed.

For these reasons, I think my turning to the Bible with the eyes of a reader of Stendhal is not a betrayal of the biblical texts but a faithful illumination of them. I might add that in this age of e-mail, when readers communicate with authors far more readily than they once did, I frequently find that devout readers—Catholic nuns, Presbyterian organists, Orthodox Jews in study groups—write to tell me that my work on the Bible has been deeply helpful to them. These are by no means the only kind of readers my writing is meant to address, but their testimony suggests that there is no contradiction between treating the Bible in literary terms and embracing it as a source of religious value.

I should mention one additional connecting thread that runs through my wandering as a critic from Genesis and Job to Kafka, Joyce, and the great Hebrew novelist S.Y. Agnon. A good many readers will have noticed my extravagant fondness for making critical arguments by close readings of extended passages from the texts I have considered. It may also have occurred at least to some that the ultimate inspiration for this procedure is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which seems to me the most seminal and enduring work of criticism written in the twentieth century. Reading *Mimesis* when I was a senior in college was a revelatory experience for me, and I have since carefully reread the whole book twice and some chapters many times. Auerbach, one recalls, structures his grand progress through Western literature from Homer and the Bible to Virginia Woolf by setting a passage from the writer to be discussed—most chapters take up more than one—at the beginning of the chapter and moving out from

a close analysis of the passage to the writer's conception of reality, his relation to literary tradition, his historical context, his underlying social, theological, psychological, or philosophic assumptions. Trained as a Romance philologist, he devotes minute attention to such formal features of the language of his texts as syntactic structures, levels of diction, indexes of time and space, verb tenses. Poems, chronicles, novels, plays, essays, memoirs (all are included in this compendious work) are artifices constructed from words, and what excited me about Auerbach was his spectacular demonstration that a scrutiny of how the words are deployed could become a privileged window through which to see more clearly the compelling subject announced in his subtitle: the representation of reality in Western literature.

*Mimesis* also pointed to a literary-historical consideration that would become important to me when I turned to the Bible. In his famous first chapter, which compares a passage from the *Odyssey* with the story in Genesis of the Binding of Isaac, Auerbach concludes that it is not Homer but the Bible that is the precursor of the representation of problematic quotidian reality that passes through Dante and Shakespeare to culminate in the realist novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I did not pay much attention to this aspect of Auerbach's story when I first read it, but, eventually, his argument helped me realize that the Bible was not somehow apart from the Western literary tradition but a generative force within it.

In regard to textual analysis, I of course have not replicated Auerbach's procedure by beginning every chapter in my own critical books with a set passage to discuss, but I have circled back again and again in my writing to specimens from the works I have sought to understand, looking closely at their style and their narrative and poetic structures in an effort to attain a fuller appreciation of the distinctive achievement of each work. The most luminous of my teachers at Harvard, Reuben Brower, a New Critic whose fine interpretive writing was never given the recognition it deserved, used to tell his classes that just as you couldn't speak cogently about a painting without considering the painter's use of perspective, color, brush-stroke, and other prop-

erties of the medium, you couldn't say much instructive about a work of literature without attending to the many complex things it did with words.

In the half-century that I have been writing about literature, modern and biblical, many waves of critical fashion have swept through the academic world, for the most part receding into oblivion after having appeared to be the one inevitable way. The New Criticism with which Reuben Brower was associated rapidly came to seem antediluvian, though the close reader Auerbach was never entirely cast aside. Structuralist scientism, Deconstructionist semantic subversiveness, and a variety of approaches that leapt—too facilely, in my view—from literature to some form of politics were successively embraced in scholarly circles through these decades, and literature as a handy springboard for political advocacy or critique is still very much with us. At the same time, there are a few signs that close reading is again becoming an interesting activity for some scholars. It is an activity to which I myself have remained unflinchingly committed for the reasons just offered. In retrospect, I have a sneaking suspicion that back in the 1970s and 80s, I was able to get away with doing close reading at a moment when to many it may have seemed retrograde because I was doing it for the Bible, a set of texts for which many people in departments of literature were happy to have fresh literary guidance. I was amused when, on the appearance of my book *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* in 1989, one left-wing reviewer dismissed it as a lot of complacent bourgeois ideology, all the more regrettable because, he remarked, the same writer had produced such a splendid study of biblical narrative. In fact, the critical method and the assumptions about literature and its relation to reality of both books were nearly identical.

Finally, beginning in the mid-1990s, I have also become a translator of the Bible and a biblical commentator as well. My own sense is that this new activity is perfectly continuous with the rest of my critical enterprise. For me the greatness of the Hebrew Bible has always been inextricable from its often magisterial deployment of the resources of the Hebrew language. English

translators of the Bible have done scant justice to its artful use of language—on the contrary, they have often done violence to it. The King James Version of course has many aspects of grandeur, but beyond its abundant inaccuracies, it is far more uneven in representing the stylistic strengths of the original, especially in the poetry, than is generally realized, and much of the eloquence it does achieve is more Jacobean than biblical. With this in mind, I began translating Genesis as an experiment—perhaps a foolhardy one, I thought—in trying to get a better English equivalent of the literary power of the Hebrew. All translations of great works are imperfect things, and I candidly recognize the imperfections of my own. Nevertheless, my English Genesis turned out to be a closer approximation to the stylistic effects of the original that I loved than I had imagined it would be, and the enthusiasm of readers and reviewers has encouraged me to continue translating the Bible.

Translation is really a very extreme form of close reading. At every minute juncture of the text, you are obliged to ask yourself: why did the writer choose this particular word and not another, why is there a shift in linguistic register or a syntactic inversion, does a cadence or word-play contribute sufficiently to meaning to require that it somehow be reproduced in translation? Wrestling with these issues is hard work but it is also intensely pleasurable because it entails immersing yourself in the rich textures and complex structures of a great work and coming to understand how they join together to convey to us perceptions of humanity and the world we would not otherwise possess. My criticism, too, has reached for such an understanding: as I have shuttled between the early Iron Age and our own era, between ancient Israel and modern Europe and America, this overriding purpose, for me a repeatedly rewarding one, has remained the same.





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